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Before the Higher Education Committee

*In Support of **SB 936: An Act Concerning Workforce Development** with additions*

Good morning Senator Slap, Representative Haddad, and members of the Committee, my name is Chris Juliano and I'm a supervising nurse at DCF Solnit South. My assigned unit is the Passaic unit but it's currently closed due to nurse shortages.

DCF Solnit South provides the highest level of care in the state for children with acute mental health needs. It is currently operating at 48% capacity, with 3 units that are offline - 2 of which were taken offline in the last 3 years due to the staffing shortages. We currently have over 32 nurse vacancies.

What we do here is different from any other hospital. We offer multidisciplinary teams, which means we have disciplines that the other hospitals don't have, such as OT and we have a school campus since the kids in hospitals can't attend school. We are set up for longer term care of children which helps them to participate in more "normal" activity and interactions. Since the kids are here for longer we're able to develop relationships and treatment plans that have a long term goal. Our facility gives the kids we care for more chances for successful outcomes and that is not available anywhere else.

These kids are the most vulnerable kids with the most severe mental health issues who can't function in other settings. They come to us after spending multiple days in ERs and hospitals. When we close units for short staffing, every other care setting gets backed up, and then kids are waiting even longer in ERs, or hospitals, or community placements waiting for a bed to open at Solnit South.

This problem can be solved. Most nurses who are currently working here at Solnit South found out about our services because they did a clinical rotation here. Most new nurses, or nurses in school don't know this place exists. We need to get DCF RNs to nursing classrooms to speak passionately about the care we provide, we can utilize the existing workforce to help teach classes. Reserving slots at community college nursing programs for state employees, offering loan forgiveness to staff working in the public sector and creating preceptor programs will all create more stability and retention within the public sector. We also need to establish graduate nurse programs so nurses can be hired as they finish school before they complete their licensure exam. We need to set up a comprehensive recruitment and retention program for nurses within state services. Thank you for your time.

